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ABSTRACT

Designed to help middle and secondary level teachers create spaces for students to explore multiple perspectives and interpretations of their texts, this brochure offers teachers who have experienced classroom talk that leads to gender divisiveness among students an opportunity to consider new ways of thinking about such talk. The brochure discusses the language of the classroom, language of the text, creating spaces, multiple perspectives and interpretations, and interrupting the status quo. The brochure presents two examples from an eighth-grade language arts classroom of the several filters (gender, social class, race, ethnicity, culture) through which readers experience text. (RS)

The Gendered Language of Texts and Classrooms: Teachers and Students Exploring Multiple Perspectives and Interpretations

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"I think the girls, we're like, we dominate, we rule the class" – Jamaica

"Since we've been talking about sexism, the girls got their own point of view and the boys got their own . . . [and] we're always against each other"—Ronnie

Spoken passionately and with conviction, these statements reflected attitudes that existed in David Hinson's seventh-grade, language arts class following a discussion of a play written by an eighth-grade student about an all-girls' soccer team that defeats a boys' soccer team. The discussion eventually led a student to ask, "Should boys be allowed to join an all-girls' softball team?" Although a few students said yes, most of them flatly rejected the idea.

The proverbial battle lines between the sexes were drawn when Cherie announced: "An all-girls' team talks about 'girl talk' so boys would ruin everything." The boys, sensing they were being cast as the outsiders, retorted with statements like, "It just shows the stupidity of women." As the name-calling escalated, the students seemed bent on excluding each other's ideas along sexist lines rather than questioning the source of those ideas and why they might hold currency among their peers.

Focus

This brochure takes up where the discussion in Mr. Hinson's room left off. It offers teachers who have experienced classroom talk that leads to gender divisiveness among students an opportunity to consider new ways of thinking about such talk. Specifically, it is designed to help middle and secondary level teachers create spaces for students to explore multiple perspectives and interpretations of their texts. Creating those spaces requires some understanding about two kinds of language: *language of the classroom* and *language of the text*. Both have implications for comprehending students' gendered ways of interacting in whole-class and small-group discussions.

Language of the Classroom

There is a great deal of emphasis currently on student-centered literacy practices. Book clubs, literature circles, and any number of strategies abound for engaging students in classroom talk about texts. However, little attention is being paid to the dynamics of such talk. This is curious, especially given what we know about adolescent preoccupation with peer approval and acceptance.

Students quickly internalize the language of classroom discussions. When these discussions center on the meanings they attach to being male or female, as in Mr. Hinson's class, gender becomes something students *do*—a way of being in the world. Over time, as stereotypes form and become more firmly inscribed each time gender is socially constructed within a class discussion, students shape their identities to fit the language they hear.

Language of the Text

Reading texts in which an author's language socially constructs gender can also inscribe stereotypes. This kind of reading demands a certain amount of complicity on the part of the reader. For example, in the following excerpt from *The Shining*, Stephen King's use of the term *womanish shriek* to characterize the wind demands a complicitous reader—one who will

call up certain stereotypes about the female voice:

> *It snowed every day now. . . . sometimes for real, the low whistle of the wind cranking up to a womanish shriek that made the old hotel rock and groan alarmingly.* (King, 1977, p. 212)

Although gendered experiences in reading may shape students' attitudes about themselves, it is their lived experience that prepares them to become complicitous readers in the first place. Merely changing *womanish shriek* to *mannish shriek* will not change young adolescents' views of the world.

What is needed for change to occur is an awareness in students of the need to explore how gender is socially constructed in a multitude of ways. Teachers who promote this awareness in students will be taking an important step toward creating spaces for students to explore multiple perspectives in classroom talk about texts.

Creating Spaces

Teachers can discover a great deal about what their students experience during text-based discussions simply by asking them individually or as a class to share their perceptions. Students may find this experience empowering, but it is important to keep in mind that empowerment is not something teachers can do *to* or *for* students. What they can do is communicate a sincere interest in understanding what they think about classroom talk.

Creating spaces for students to explore multiple perspectives based on multiple readings of their texts requires that teachers develop a sense of community in the classroom. Students say they like discussions when they feel comfortable with each other, when teachers moderate but don't dominate classroom talk, and when teachers involve them in selecting the materials they will read for discussion. The importance of listening to what students have to say is crucial to developing a sense of community. Yet taking a listening stance is not an easy one for teachers to assume, accustomed as they are to being in charge and feeling responsible for whatever learning goes on. In one teacher's words:

> *"I always felt like I should be in control of what they learned, and I don't think that way anymore. I firmly believe. . .that the more active the kids are as discussants and decision makers, in particular, the more they get out of learning."*—Sally Randall

Multiple Perspectives and Interpretations

Exploring multiple perspectives and interpretations is something teachers do quite naturally when their goal is to engage students in thinking critically about what they read. When applied to reading texts in which an author's language socially constructs gender in a manner that demands complicitous readers, this approach to critical thinking focuses on the meanings that are attached to being male or female.

However, gender is but one of several filters through which readers experience texts. Social class, race, ethnicity, and culture are others. Consider, for instance, the overlapping filters that are operating in the following examples from Sally Randall's eighth-grade language arts classroom.

Example 1. Ms. Randall's class had finished reading an excerpt from *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck

in their literature anthology. Rather than assign the questions at the end of the selection, she asked the students to consider a series of quotations from the first chapter. One quotation helped students consider how gendered ways of thinking and writing can show up in their own talk about the text.

> *Kino had wondered often at the iron in his patient, fragile wife. She, who was obedient and respectful and cheerful and patient, she could arch her back in child pain with hardly a cry. She could stand fatigue and hunger almost better than Kino himself. In the canoe she was like a strong man.* (Steinbeck, 1989 p. 677)

After students read this quotation, Ms. Randall asked them to consider why Steinbeck wrote the description of Kino's wife in this way. The first student to respond, said Juana (Kino's wife) had the physical characteristics of a man but still gave Kino the honor and respect he deserved because he was a man. Ms. Randall then underlined the word *almost* and the phrase *like a strong man*. She asked the class to think about what those words implied. A student spoke up to say that Juana may have had qualities like a man but they were also women's qualities. Exchanges such as these allow students to explore multiple perspectives.

Example 2. The Pearl became the focus for another discussion in Ms. Randall's class. This time the students were asked to consider who was the more dominant character—Kino or Juana. Most of them concluded it had to be Kino because he was the man, and he made all the decisions for his family. Ms. Randall asked, "Do you think this is pretty common in literature for the man to be the dominant one?" Heads nodded in agreement, with Paula explaining the phenomenon this way:

> *Well, it kind of just started in the beginning. Adam was made first, and that was kind of like the man was the head of the family. And so it was just kind of in all the stories. That's just likely to be applied to real life. That's just the way.*

With this example, it is easy to see how the language of the classroom and the language of the text conspire to socially construct what it means to be male, and, by implication, what it means to be female. Here, the weight of religion, literary history, and culture combine to leave little doubt in Paula's mind that this is just the way life is, has always been, and will always be.

Interrupting the Status Quo

Creating spaces for students to explore multiple perspectives and interpretations of their texts is a starting point. However, as evidenced in Example #2, the filters through which students experience and discuss such texts may perpetuate the status quo, and in the process, reinforce the very stereotypes that the discussion was originally designed to examine and possibly challenge. Interrupting the status quo will require supporting students as they begin to question the source of the ideas and values they hear expressed in class discussions. It will also require a willingness on the part of teachers to take an active presence in discussions that threaten to perpetuate ingrained ways of thinking about what it means to be male and female.

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Suggested Readings

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